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ABSTRACT

This study documents the benefits of tutoring as a clinical experience for the prospective teacher. The program was developed to give the teacher candidates a perspective on the likelihood that they will encounter vast differences between their life experiences and those of their students. These differences may be racial, ethnic, and/or cultural. The major objective of the tutoring experience is to provide contextual understanding of the individual student. During the tutoring period, the preservice teacher engages in inquiry about the student who is being tutored, the student's social and cultural contexts, and the school context. The teachers seek to understand the student's perception of school, teachers, parents, and other students. They are encouraged to learn as much as possible from the students and to compare these learnings with their own life situations in a series of story telling protocols. Critical and reflective thinking about the contextual discrepancies between home and school is stimulated through seminar sessions, journal writings, and anecdotal records. (JD)

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ENHANCING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT THEIR LEARNERS

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February 24, 1990

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Paper presented for the Annual Meeting of AACTE, Chicago, Illinois, February 22-24, 1990.

Enhancing Pre-Service Teachers' Contextual Understandings About Their Learners

Patricia M. Ryan
Karen S. Robinson

> Teacher training has created generations of classroom managers, schooled in gimmickry and frightened to death of their children and of their own feelings. Teacher training has created defensive teachers, teachers who in their anticipation of disruption oppress and coerce their students. And teacher training has failed to produce democratic climates for learners who are democratic.
>
> And here we sit! One-fourth of our school children are in families that live in or close to a culture of poverty. Many of them, and many others, live in families with varied (sometimes rural) life styles. Teachers come from the dominant and culturally-exclusive middle group in America. They are trained to become the rulers of their domains. They are oppressive to most children; they are intolerant of differences among children within even their own ethnic and cultural phylum; they are misled about the nature of learning and insist on a uniform structuring of subject matter for all their learners; and they confront their classroom situations expecting hostility. Imagine the helplessness that overpowers the children of the poor when they encounter the typically trained American public school teacher! (Lawless, 1986)

The purpose of this presentation is to share our efforts to facilitate in our students more tolerance for, and acceptance of, diversity. We describe a required one-on-one tutoring experience for pre-service students and report our use of storytelling

as a strategy for building bridges between tutors and tutees.

Many writers (e.g., Banks, 1988; Jencks et al., 1972; Sleeter and Grant, 1988) have noted a growing gap between home and school. A fifteen-year old student recently stated it most powerfully: "Public school teachers are no longer part of the same community as the majority of their students" (Perry, 1988, p. 335). She described the public high school experience as "one of the most blatant forms of oppression and inequity for lower class students in American society" (Perry, 1988, p. 335). Teachers have bemoaned this gap between them and their students for some time. In a Carnegie Foundation-sponsored survey, teachers reiterated their frustration with "the great numbers of kids who come from emotionally, physically, socially, and financially stressed homes" (Boyer, 1989, p. 73). As teacher educators often supervising in school classrooms, the authors find themselves constantly being queried by both classroom teachers and teachers-in-training: "How can we do it all? So much is expected of us! The academic needs of our students are such a minor part of the issues before us!"

Demographic forecasts predict an exacerbation of the dilemma: one-third of public school populations will be Hispanic-American and African-American by

the turn of the next century (Hodgkinson, 1988). At present, the number of minority teachers is low--less than 10%; even more alarming, the numbers of minorities preparing to teach are declining (Trent, 1986). While this "majority teachers/minority students" prediction is a highly publicized dilemma for future classrooms, more meaningful perhaps, are the vast differences, regardless of racial, ethnic, class or gender characteristics, between the life experiences of the teacher and the student.

In light of the likely differences between the student and teacher of the future, the admonitions of writers such as Cazden and Mehan (1989) gain in importance: pre-service teacher education must facilitate the understanding of the multiple contexts in which the students are functioning. At Otterbein College, a private midwestern liberal arts institution, future teachers are addressing this challenge as they tutor students as part of their curriculum requirements. Their one-on-one tutoring sessions are enriched by a series of storytelling protocols.

SETTING

Most of the pre-service teachers at Otterbein mirror the prototype of the teacher predicted for the future: "female, in the early to mid-twenties, Anglo, from a lower-middle income to a middle-income family"

(Cazden and Mehan, 1989, p. 46). The tutoring occurs in a public school district whose milieu appears similar to that of the college. The students being tutored also appear to be similar to the pre-service teachers. However, a deeper look at those students being tutored and their cultural contexts reveals important differences between the future teacher and the student, and their respective contexts. While this mismatch may not necessarily be along racial or socioeconomic class lines, the tutors frequently find themselves listening to life stories with which they are uncomfortable and unexperienced; the cultures from which they come are not the same. [Hilliard's (1989) broad definition of "culture" applies here; i.e., the style or personality of the group. Hilliard's admonition of educators "to not confuse race and class with culture" also applies (p. 66).] For example, Otterbein tutors are often perplexed by tutees who "don't care about grades", frustrated by students' drug-related mood swings, and shocked at the ease with which children report physical abuse at home.

The tutoring situation

The tutoring occurs concomitant with the pre-service teacher's enrollment in an Educational Psychology class. Tutors are assigned to an elementary, middle, or secondary level student based

on recommendations of classroom teachers and guidance counselors. The tutoring occurs over a period of approximately 10 weeks, with a total of 16-25 hours spent by each tutor-tutee pair. Most of the meetings are at the tutee's school, during her/his free period or study hall. Occasionally, special outside-of-the-school-day and off-site arrangements are made. Tutors seek information about the academic needs of their students from student records, standardized test data, teachers, and their own informal assessments. The tutors are urged to make contact with the family of the tutee. In addition, the college instructor is available for assistance on tutoring matters. Weekly seminars are led by the instructors and allow a support system to grow. During these sessions, important sharing and reflection occur. Here tutors swap ideas and commiserate about their challenging and often frustrating tasks.

Improvement of the teacher trainee's instructional planning skills, though important, is NOT the major objective of the tutoring experience; instead, the focus is <u>contextual understanding</u>. We want our student tutors to <u>get to know an individual</u>--to develop a personal relationship with that individual. Through a variety of carefully supervised clinical assignments, the pre-service teacher engages in inquiry about the student who is

being tutored, the student's social and cultural contexts, and the school context. Tutors seek answers to the following: What is the student's academic, cultural, and social history? How have family and school officials interacted? How is this student perceived by teachers? by other students? by parents? Teacher education students are encouraged to learn as much as possible from the student and to compare these learnings with their own life situations. Critical and reflective thinking by the pre-service teacher about these cultural contrasts is stimulated through seminar sessions, journal writings, anecdotal records, "kid watching", and especially, storytelling. A final paper, entitled "So What I've Tutored", synthesizes the entire tutoring experience.

Storytelling protocols

Three storytelling sessions are held. These sessions utilize a variation of the narrative approach to storytelling as described by Tappan and Brown (1989). The purpose of this approach is for each party to reflect on a variety of personal issues related to home and school and to share those reflections.

In order to elicit the storytelling, standard questions are suggested; tutors elaborate or rephrase these questions when necessary and make any other

modifications to the storytelling protocol which they determine will facilitate the tutee's comfort with the questions and the quality of the interaction. After the tutees react to the questions, the tutors share their own answers to the storytelling questions. Each member of the pair acts, at different times, as the storyteller. Afterwards, tutor and tutee seek together "common ground" between their stories.

RESULTS

Elaborate self reports from the teacher candidate participants confirmed our sense of success with both the tutoring and the storytelling. Through these complementary strategies, "bridges were built", differences were revealed and accepted, and the future teachers improved their understanding of the multiple contexts in which their tutees were functioning. Information which is reported below was extrapolated from 39 student reports. These reports came in the form of journals, anecdotal recording of storytelling sessions, and a final synthesizing paper. (Note: tabulations to "yes"/"no" questions show a discrepancy between totals. In some cases, the students do not report a response to a question.)

Tutoring

The worth of the tutoring experience was clearly manifested in the tutors' synthesizing, final paper, entitled "So What I've Tutored". Every participant reported tutoring to be a worthwhile experience using phrases like: "very wonderful", "enormously informative", "incredibly rewarding", "extremely important", "enriching". Even in a case where a tutor reported failure in contributing to the academic improvement of a tutee, non-academic growth was proclaimed: "Although the progess overall would look very minimal, I think that Shawn and I gained something just as important as bookwork, and that was friendship." Common in many of the final papers was the notion that tutoring was mutually beneficial with both the tutor and the tutee "growing" as a result of the experience. The tutors reported the growth as "educational", "mental", "emotional", and/or "spiritual". A music education major exclaimed, "Tutoring changed my whole outlook in terms of my view of myself and teaching as a profession."

Some highlighted the "growth" in terms of learning and practicing some necessary teaching skills. One secondary math teacher candidate stated, "I experienced a small taste of what teaching is really like. I needed to plan every night and then be prepared for the unexpected." The complexity of

teaching was unveiled repeatedly with statements such as: "I learned that teaching is more than sharing your knowledge of your content area"; "Tutoring drove home for me the point that education is a partnership between students, parents, and teachers"; and, "I was surprised that I had to adapt to the student's needs in order to teach him anything." One pre-service teacher described the tutoring experience as "bittersweet" and declared that teaching must be the same. Both teaching and tutoring, she claimed, have not only challenges, frustrations, and disappointments, but also rewards and joys.

Over and over the students communicated the relevance of the individuality and uniqueness of the learner. To this importance one to-be secondary English teacher vowed, "When I teach I will make an effort to see that all of my students get some individual time." In order to be an effective teacher, one of the high school tutors stated, the the student must be a "first priority".

Storytelling

Almost without exception, the tutors reported that the storytelling sessions had positive effects on their relationships with their tutees. ("These sessions were ice-breakers." "Despite our being emotional opposites, we do have several things in

common!"). As they shared their self-descriptions, tutors and tutees revealed fears, anxieties, self-doubts, and prejudices. Some tutees described themselves amusingly ("I can make burps"); others were startling in their intensity or self-deprecation ("I hate life"; "I'll always be ugly"). The pairs shared whether teachers had come to know them "as a person" (12 tutees out of 38, and 6 tutors out of 38, said "no"). They reported whether teachers had had with them "a conversation about real life" (25 tutees out of 38, and 18 tutors out of 39, said "no"). Tutors and tutees reacted to whether "school is different from real life" (19 out of 29 tutees', and 2 of 32 tutors, agreed). Most tutees (32 out of 38) responded that a teacher had not visited in their homes. Although 20 out of 37 tutors had experienced a teacher's visit, there was general agreement by tutee and tutor that such an experience would make them "nervous" or "uncomfortable". They would "feel weird" or worry that "the house would be a mess". One tutee said, "I would stay in my room."

The personal discussions held in the storytelling sessions were valued highly by most of the tutors. They commented that "trust was built", "mutual respect" was generated, and "common ground was a base for a good relationship". One tutor wrote, "My tutee sometimes says things I remember saying." "Opening up" was an oft-repeated phrase in

the tutors' journals. Several tutors used information from the storytelling sessions to "frame" the academic work for the tutees (e.g., the tutee who was told so much about football that she posed math word problems thereafter in gridiron terms!!). In general, the storytelling sessions broke down barriers and assisted what otherwise might have been a difficult and awkward situation. Parts of two different "stories" reported below are typical and illustrate the personal revelations that were shared and which became foundations for the trust which occurred between the tutor and tutee. When discussing a "teacher who got to know me as a person", Nick, a third grader, said:

> My speech teacher, Mrs. B. . . . She was nice and always had candy. I told her about my parents fighting and she was always nice. I would choose her as a friend because she would talk and never be mean. She helped me with my speech and I always felt comfortable with her.

A fifth grader, Billy, in describing "who are you, what makes you be you" stated:

> I'm a boy and happy most of the time. I'm grumpy in the mornings. I like to play sports like football and soccer. I kind of like my sister. My Dad and Mom help me out a lot and help me to be a good person.

CONCLUSION

A plethora of data exists which predicts demographic differences between tomorrow's teachers and their students (Hodgkinson, 1988). Furthermore,

our informal data validate the conclusion that serious gaps exist between students and teachers--gaps which are, broadly speaking, cultural, and which often preclude positive relationships between the major parties of the learning situations. Knowledge of these differences, however, has resulted more in mandated lip-service regarding the importance of multi-cultural teacher education than in unique practices or to significant research conclusions (Grant, 1989). Some evidence suggests that what is being done is not enough to prepare tomorrow's teachers for understanding or appreciating their students (Grant, 1981; Grant and Koskela, 1986).

We have attempted to "go beyond" the teacher education student's "book learning" about classroom practice and to encourage a deeper, more personal relationship with one student than student teaching allows. Watching our students develop personal relationships with their tutees, we have been led to more questions: What might be the result of storytelling in a large group situation (like the classroom)? What might be the effect of frequent and long term use of stroytelling in classrooms? How can schools be restructured to allow for more "personal sharing" between teacher and student?

Our tutoring and storytelling component requires the future teacher to confront the realities of one

person's life and her/his struggles with "the fit" of classroom issues with the other demands of life. The pre-service teacher is highly involved in an active human experience: talking with and listening to a student extensively, informally, and personally. The study was an effort to create a climate of "shared personal experiences that [can] override the sense of psychological distance that cultural differences can create" (Cazden and Mehan, 1989, p. 55). The words of one teacher-to-be dramatize this psychological distance that exists and the contextual understanding which she gained:

> There is a saying, "Some people march to a different drummer--and some people polka." I think I just finished ten weeks of polkaing with a most unusual partner. I was expecting the tutorial experience to be a situation in which someone would come to me with a particular academic problem and I would help them--maybe even fix it. I expected to be able to plan out each tutoring session and progress in a measured, controlled fashion, rather like a march, with each session building on the previous one until positive, visible results, such as test results, were shown. Instead, I was paired with someone who definitely polkas through life, school included, and I had to step to the music, moving quickly, steps changing all the time, and continually going in circles.

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